



# Press Release

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## ***DHHS Update for Hurricane Evacuees***

(Little Rock--) Health issues top the list of concerns for hurricane evacuees in Arkansas. The Arkansas Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is battling several fronts to protect the health, safety and welfare for those displaced by hurricane Katrina. DHHS Director John Selig along with Dr. Joe Thompson, Arkansas' Chief Health Officer and Dr. Paul Halverson, Director of the DHHS Division of Health and State Health Officer, described the concerns of health officials at a news conference held today at the agency's Emergency Operations Center.

Local health and human services staff are collaborating with community partners to provide social and medical services to those in need. "A key benefit to the recent DHHS merger is already apparent," said Selig. Having health and human services in one agency allows us to completely wrap services around those who have lost so much to disaster. Our employees have worked around the clock to ensure disaster victims have needed food, shelter, and health care."

The Emergency Operations Center serves as the organization's core network for providing support around the state. Halverson says his experience with the CDC enables him to activate resources in a public health crisis quickly. "Mobilizing assets around the state during a disaster is a logistical ballet," said Halverson. "This is exactly what The Centers for Disease Controls and Prevention has trained us for, and because of that training, we are able to take care of several thousand people in an extremely short window of time."

Evacuees can call the DHHS hotline for additional health and human services information at 1-800-651-3493 or can click on the website at [www.healthyarkansas.com](http://www.healthyarkansas.com). The State's KARE hotline number is 1-877-293-5273 and the website is [www.kare.arkansas.gov](http://www.kare.arkansas.gov). DHHS will issue further updates as necessary.

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## **Disease Update**

A critical function of DHHS during crisis is monitoring public health outbreaks in general populations or in hospitals. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, this tracking system has been expanded to include general shelters, camps, and emergency rooms.

So far, the Department is reporting no outbreaks of communicable disease. Dr. Joe Thompson states, "Please remember that these folks are our neighbors and our friends. While it is understandable that Arkansans might be concerned about contracting a contagious disease, the risk is low. The last thing that displaced citizens need is a stigma attached to them as a result of everything they have been through. The shelters and camps are practicing infectious disease control measures."

"Children of evacuees are starting to enroll in Arkansas schools," added Thompson. "Parents have expressed concerns; however, these children have had the same immunization requirements as Arkansas children. We're accessing the immunization records of affected states and will work with schools to ensure that children are appropriately vaccinated."

There are no outbreaks of hepatitis A. The risk for this disease in disaster-affected areas has been historically low, but vaccine is being recommended for evacuees in shelters as a precautionary measure. This is recommended by the CDC because the evacuees are living together in large numbers. Volunteers and health care workers in the shelters/camps are not at greater risk because they routinely practice infectious disease control measures.

Although the outbreak of infectious diseases may be a possibility, according to the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), widespread outbreaks of infectious disease after hurricanes are not common in the United States. Outbreaks of rare and deadly diseases do not suddenly occur after hurricanes and floods in areas where such diseases do not naturally occur.

Arkansas is reporting two confirmed cases of *Vibrio vulnificus* infection in hurricane evacuees. *Vibrio vulnificus* is a bacterium that is a rare cause of illness in the United States. While a public health concern, science shows this disease is not contagious. Dr. Joe Thompson, Chief Health Officer, states, "This bacterium is not spread from person to person. You cannot get infected from being in contact with a sick person. The period of time between exposure to contaminated water and the onset of illness is usually only a few days. For this reason, we do not expect to see many more cases of *Vibrio vulnificus* infection."

Because cholera and typhoid are not commonly found in the U.S. Gulf States area, it is very unlikely that they would occur after Hurricane Katrina. There have been no cases of cholera or typhoid reported since Hurricane Katrina hit. *Vibrio vulnificus* and *Vibrio cholera* should not be confused.